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**KOREA - 1950:  
THE DECISION  
TO INVADE THE NORTH...**  
(What would Carl have thought?)

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Art of War Essay  
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Seminar: "Delta"  
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*The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.<sup>1</sup>*  
Carl von Clausewitz

Sunday, 0400 hours, 25 June 1950...the assault came without warning. Eight North Korean infantry divisions exploded across the 38th Parallel into South Korea through gaps torn by armor and artillery. By 0900 hours, the city of Kaesong (twenty six miles north of Seoul) had fallen. By 1200 hours the airfields at Kimpo and Seoul were under attack. By 2400 hours, with North Korean armor seventeen miles from Seoul, U. S. Ambassador Muccio ordered the evacuation of American dependents from Seoul and Inchon. By 0045 hours, 26 June 1950, the Far East Air Force (FEAF) had orders to provide fighter cover for the evacuation. A full scale invasion of South Korea had begun and U.S. forces would soon be engaged in earnest.<sup>2</sup>

With these U.S. forces engaged in this post-World War II, "police action" what nature of war was this to be and what were the objectives? Prior to committing forces, had the contemporary American political and military leadership agreed to a "police action" that Clausewitz would define as directed at the *total defeat of an enemy* or did the leadership view it more as a war to be conducted with *limited aims* With U.S. airmen striking targets within the North Korean capital four days after hostilities began, had this "first of all strategic questions" that Clausewitz posed been successfully answered? If so, was the answer the same for both American political and military leaders? Most importantly, was the decision to invade North Korea in September 1950 and drive north toward the Chinese border sound if the nature of the war itself had not been determined?

My essay will address these questions and will present the case that the

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<sup>1</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 88-89.

<sup>2</sup> Robert F. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1950-1953*, (New York NY: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1961), pp. 9-10.

American decision to invade North Korea and carry the ground war beyond the 38th Parallel toward the Chinese border was inconsistent with the political realities of September 1950. I suggest, the American leadership had different notions of the "kind of war" that unexpectedly presented itself and of the obtainable political objective in the June-November 1950 period. Additionally, I feel as the military situation began to "optimistically" change over the summer of 1950, the leadership was unable to balance the military costs versus political return which eventually led to the intervention of twenty six divisions of Chinese "volunteers" (plus a reserve of over 200,000)."<sup>3</sup> Clausewitz would have observed, the cost of a total military victory in Korea by the fall of 1950 was out of proportion to the original political objective!

In order to contrast these conflicting notions of the political and military objectives during the summer and fall of 1950, I will trace the hostilities during the following two time periods:

\* **25 June 1950 - 15 September 1950**: to portray events from the initial North Korean invasion through the Inchon Landing.

\* **28 September 1950 - 25 November 1950**: to portray events from the liberation of the South Korean capital through the first major Chinese attacks on American forces.

**25 June - 15 September 1950**: By 27 June, following the North Korean invasion, the situation was desperate; Seoul was overrun, the Han River bridges were blown, President Sigmund Rhee had fled the capitol, the ROK army was disintegrating, and "clearly survival of the Republic of Korea...depended on American intervention."<sup>4</sup> On 27 June, President Truman, after consulting with the national security staff, concurred with the evacuation of American dependents and issued a statement defining the political objective to be "the restoration of an independent, non-

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<sup>3</sup> William Manchester, American Caesar, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1978), p. 611.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph C. Goulden, Korea-The Untold Story of the War, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1962), p. 83.

Communist South Korea to its preinvasion territorial status.”<sup>5</sup> He reiterated this objective on 29 June with a statement “that he wanted it clearly understood that our operations in Korea were designed to restore peace there and to restore the border.”<sup>6</sup> The same day Secretary of State Acheson declared “that U.S...forces were fighting solely for the purpose of restoring the Republic of Korea to its status prior to the invasion.”<sup>7</sup> On 30 June, President Truman authorized the introduction of U.S. ground forces into the war. He appeared ready to do what was necessary to push the North Koreans back across the 38th Parallel. I suggest, by late June 1950, the President was convinced the political objective was the restoration of South Korea to its antebellum status without widening the war in the Far East. Clausewitz would have defined this political objective as direction for military actions to be conducted within the context of a war directed toward *limited aims*

*The political object - the original motive for the war -  
will determine both the military objective to be reached  
and the amount of effort it requires.<sup>8</sup>*

*Carl von Clausewitz*

While the leadership of the United Nations agreed with President Truman’s political objective, President Rhee and General MacArthur were not convinced. President Rhee, reacting to a successful invasion of his country, declared, “we have to advance as far as the Manchurian border until not a single enemy soldier is left in our country...we will not allow ourselves to stop.”<sup>9</sup> MacArthur’s stated plan, thinking ahead to potential offensive actions, “(was to) counterattack with an amphibious landing behind (North Korean) lines. After destroying Communist troops on both sides of the 38th Parallel, he (planned to) *compose and unite*

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Clodfelter, The Limits of AirPower-The American Bombing of North Vietnam, (New York: The Free Press, 1989) p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph C. Goulden, Korean-The Untold Story of the War, p. 234.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 234

<sup>8</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, On War, p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph C. Goulden, Korea-The Untold Story of the War, p. 236.

Korea."<sup>10</sup> I suggest that prior to the invasion at Inchon, the principle American and South Korean leaders were not only in disagreement as to the political objective, but were inconsistent in their view of the nature of the war in which they were participating. While President Truman viewed the "police action" as *a war with limited aims*, President Rhee and General MacArthur were viewing these hostilities as *a war directed at the total defeat of the enemy* (as well as the North Korean government). Clausewitz would have cautioned these political and military leaders to first, *establish the kind of war on which they are embarking...and not mistake it or turn it into something alien to its nature*. He would further suggest, *this first of all strategic questions* must be addressed prior to large scale offensive actions being initiated in the summer of 1950.

*The political object is the goal, war is the  
means of reaching it, and means can never be  
considered in isolation from their purpose."*  
Carl von Clausewitz

These offensive actions began with the simultaneous USMC landing at Inchon and an Eighth Army attack from Pusan on 15 September. The military objective was to liberate Seoul and trap the main North Korean Army between the two American forces on the peninsula. On 28 September General MacArthur declared the city of Seoul "liberated" and returned control of the capital city to President Rhee.

**28 September 1950 - 25 November 1950:** Following the successful American offensive, the "collapse of North Korean People's Army changed the military balance on the peninsula (as well as) the political dynamic Washington."<sup>12</sup> The flush of early success began to have its effects on President Truman and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

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<sup>10</sup>Michael Schaller, Douglas MacArthur-The Far Eastern General, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 193.

<sup>11</sup>Carl von Clausewitz, On War, p. 87.

<sup>12</sup>Michael Schaller, MacArthur-The Far Eastern General, p. 199.

Following the rapid successes of; the Inchon landing, the breakout from Pusan, and the liberation of Seoul, the American political and military leaders in Washington became opportunistic in a drastic reassessment of the original political objective. They began to question their original conservatism and view favorably President Rhee and General MacArthur's suggestion of waging a war aimed at the *total defeat of the the North Korean military army and government*. Acting on this new "political objective," the President and Joint Chiefs abandoned their *limited aims* and instructed MacArthur to "plan for the possible occupation of North Korea."<sup>13</sup> At this juncture, the original political object of restoring South Korea to its original status was altered and the new political object became the reunification of the peninsula. The United Nations, "endorsing a U.S. proposal (legitimized this new political object) declaring the UN objective was the establishment of a unified, independent, and democratic government of all Korea."<sup>14</sup>

*...at this stage we must take a broader view  
because the original political objects can greatly alter during  
the course of the war and may finally change entirely...<sup>15</sup>  
Carl von Clausewitz*

However, this political objective of a "unified, democratic government of all Korea" did not meet with approval everywhere in East Asia. "The Chinese, fully aroused...saw MacArthur's army thundering toward them, and despite UN profession of plans for a peacefully unified Korea, they believed themselves to be in mortal danger."<sup>16</sup> On 30 September, the day after MacArthur's "liberation" ceremony in Seoul, the Foreign Minister of the newly declared People's Republic of China, Chou En-lai, broadcast a warning that the Beijing leadership would not tolerate a crossing of the 38th Parallel. On 3 October, Chou En-lai summoned the Indian ambassador to Beijing and told him "that should UN forces cross the 38th Parallel, China would send

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<sup>13</sup> William Manchester, American Caesar, p. 584.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 585.

<sup>15</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, On War, p. 92.

<sup>16</sup> William Manchester, American Caesar, p. 586.

troops to the Korean frontier to defend North Korea."<sup>17</sup> (That crossing had in fact come on 2 October.) And, on 8 October Chou En-lai again broadcast a warning, stating "American soldiers were menacing Chinese security, and we cannot stand idly by..."<sup>18</sup> During the first week of October, Chinese troops began to cross the Yalu River and enter North Korea. "Chinese sources stress this decision to intervene...came in (direct) response to the American move to destroy North Korea and the...uncertainty over whether MacArthur would observe any limits."<sup>19</sup> During the third week of October, UN forces reached the Yalu River and took up defensive positions, exacerbating Chinese fears. The Chinese leadership reacted. "Late on 25 November, nearly 300,000 Chinese and...65,000 North Korean troops began a massive counterattack. By 1 December, UN forces had suffered over 11,000 casualties and were in danger of again being pushed off the peninsula."<sup>20</sup> American political objectives were once more reassessed.

Facing uncertain results in this new phase of the Korean "police action," President Truman abandoned any hope of a unified, independent, and democratic Korea and after 28 November "sought primarily to preserve American troops, arrange an armistice, and avoid a wider war (in East Asia)."<sup>21</sup> This decision brings us full circle from relinquishing the political objective of *the total defeat of the North Korean Army and government* back to the original *limited aim* of insuring the territorial sovereignty of South Korea. Clausewitz would have again cautioned these political and military leaders *not to mistake the kind of war on which they were embarked*. The threat of Chinese intervention (and of tacit support of Stalin's Soviet Union) had been ignored. In the fall of 1950, Clausewitz would have certainly felt the cost of a total military victory had become disproportional to the latest political objective. The deliberate limiting of the war to the Korean peninsula, not striking

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 586.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 586.

<sup>19</sup>Michael Schaller, Douglas MacArthur-The Far Eastern General, p. 202.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 213.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 214.

either Chinese or Soviet targets made an unlimited war whose aim was total defeat of the enemy (or enemies) impossible.

*The main lines along which military events progress  
and to which they are restricted, are political lines that continue  
throughout the war...How could it be otherwise?<sup>22</sup>  
Carl von Clausewitz*

### **BOTTOM LINE:**

This essay has addressed the inconsistent interpretations of the nature of the war in Korea as well as the conflicting objectives and political realities of the summer and fall of 1950. Clausewitz's first of all strategic questions had not been addressed and consensus reached by President Truman and General MacArthur prior to the invasion of North Korea. There was no agreement as to the nature of this widening Korean "police action" or to consistent political objectives for the long term in East Asia. In light of thirty three subsequent months of continued fighting and stalemate, the decision to invade North Korea and proceed north of the 38th Parallel was clearly a political and military mistake.

President Truman allowed himself to be influenced by the hope of a quick victory against the emerging Communist threat without really thinking through the realities of a new, aggressive, hostile, regime in Beijing. General MacArthur, flushed with the success of his "masterstroke" at Inchon, and enjoying a rich career of victory and personal triumphs, allowed himself to become overconfident and focused on the destruction of North Korea. The decision to proceed north of the 38th Parallel was flawed. At the time, Walter Millis observed, "Perhaps (this...) most critical decision of the Korean War had been taken. But it had been taken in the worst way, for confused reasons, on deficient intelligence and with an inadequate appreciation of the risks." **Carl von Clausewitz would have agreed!!!**

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<sup>22</sup>Carl von Clausewitz, On War, p. 605.

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